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School of Arts  
Virginia Commonwealth University

This is to certify that the thesis prepared by Dragana Crnjak entitled LandEscape has been approved by her committee as satisfactory completion of the thesis requirement for the degree of Master of Fine Art

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05/03/2004

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# LANDESCAPE

A Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Masters of Fine Art at Virginia Commonwealth University.

by

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Master of Fine Art, Virginia Commonwealth University, 2004

Bachelor of Fine Art, The University of Akron, 2003

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Richmond, Virginia  
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I would like to thank my peers for sharing the experiences of graduate school with me, to art faculty for challenging and encouraging my work, and my husband Aleksandar for love, understanding and support.

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## Abstract

### LANDESCAPE

By Dragana Crnjak, Master of Fine Art

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Art at Virginia Commonwealth University.

Virginia Commonwealth University, 2004

Major Director: Javier Tapia  
Professor, Department of Painting and Printmaking

Shape, color and line are three basic elements I use to explore the possibilities of visual language. The process in itself is important since what is left on the paper are simply records of moments from which a work is constructed. These moments are mixtures of my memory, my everyday observation, my struggles and hopes. The starting point is always in between known and unknown, and it is always a new attempt for clarity. Rather than expressing what I already understand and know, I have a need to change my working methods quite often in order to expand my own limits.

Since I moved from Serbia into the United States in 1997, landscape has been evident in my work. However, my thinking about landscape has gradually changed. I



understand now that this transformation parallels both my physical and emotional transition from my homeland to America. A sense of displacement has been present through all the processes, but its meaning and how it is reflected in my work has changed. From describing the actual, physical displacement from my homeland in the earlier works, the sense of displacement now comes from the abstracted formal elements of the work itself.

## Introduction

Since I saw Paul Klee's drawing called *Angel, Still Ugly*, a few weeks ago, I have been thinking about it repeatedly. The simplicity of a drawing that can fuse these opposing ideas together fascinates me. I think of its suggested and unfinished features, the nonfunctioning wings and clumsy legs, the smile and the crammed head. I keep looking at it because this creature has the energy I have been feeling recently. My work, I believe, reflects this feeling that comes from a need to connect together the opposites of my everyday life, memories and motivations.

## Painting the Place

When I began graduate school my paintings resembled Abstract Expressionism even though I never truly felt I worked within this style. The existentialist idea of searching for the meanings of life through the painting process is, I believe, something I still share with Abstract Expressionism. However, the idea that a painting can reveal the essence of life and be completed steadily conflicts with the more convincing idea to me that painting should remain unfinished, and record the transformations of its meanings. Besides the influences of Pollock's expansive and lyrical paintings, the surface tensions in Franz Kline's and Clifford Still's paintings, the transparency and mystery of Mark Rothko's landscapes, and the fluidity of Helen Frankenthaler's work, I was also drawn to Cy Twombly's, Robert Rymen's and Terry Winters' sensibilities for materials. The physicality of painted surface often revealed nervous and uncontrolled movements through the layers of thick paint, and the scratches and drips of more liquid paint (Fig. 1). Even though I looked at the works of these artists and was influenced by their ways of handling the paint, my paintings referenced a personal story.

The paintings were of the same landscape -- a village where I spent my childhood summers. Predominantly abstract, there was almost always a house, a tree or a fence in the painting that made them look pictorial, even representational to some degree. The color and mark making often made the landscapes mysterious and isolated. For instance, a

house -- the only recognizable and stable object on a monochrome surface -- would be suggested in a corner of a painting. Around it, scribbled, nervous lines created a sense of movement and speed. These paintings looked like theatrical stages where something just happened or was about to happen. They had titles such as *Before and After*, *LandEscape*, and *Departure* (Fig.2). Painting them was a process of revisiting and rediscovering the place I felt was the only one I belonged to at the time.

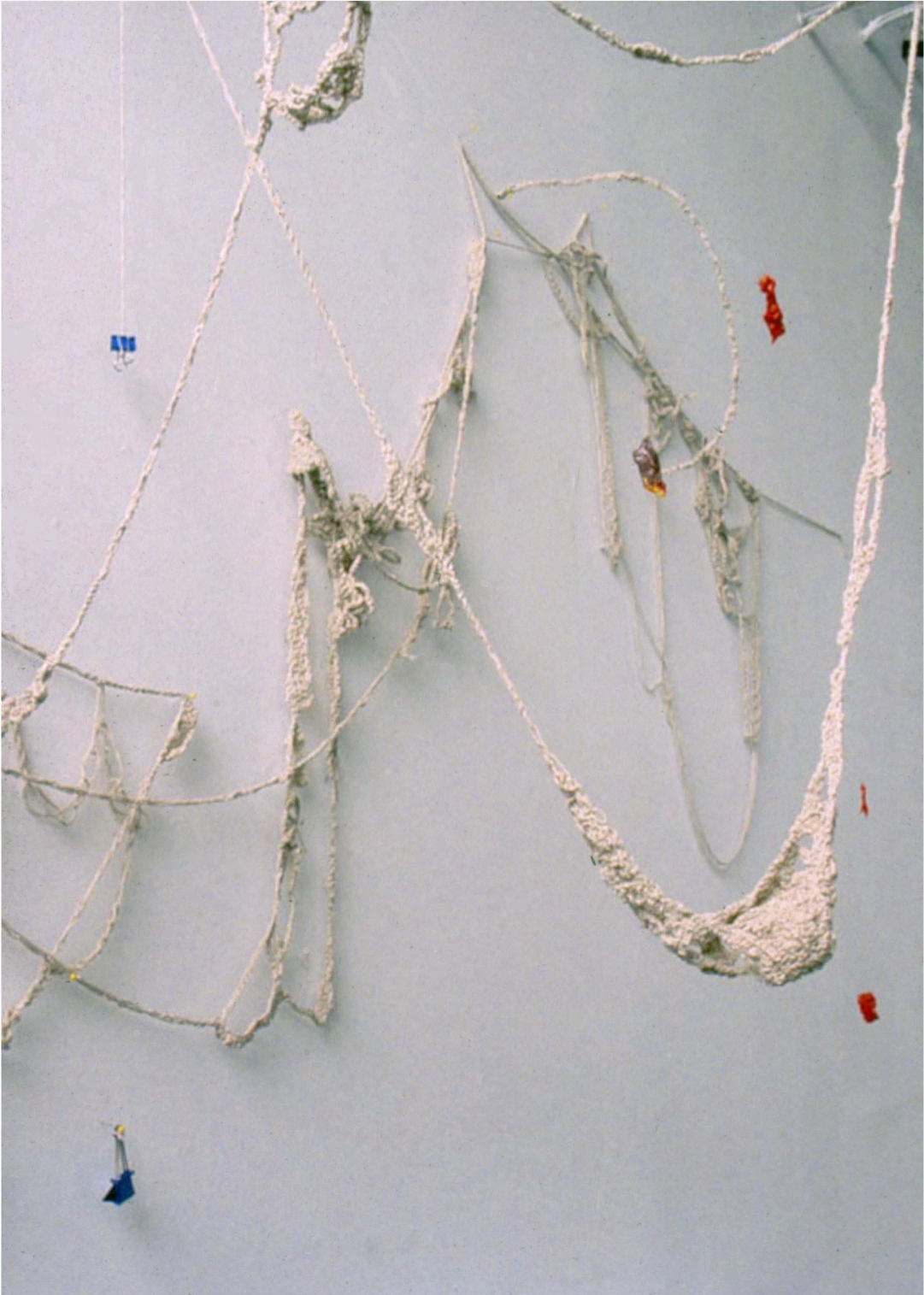
One of the big influences on me at this time was filmmaker Andrey Tarkowsky. Tarkowsky studied painting, which influenced the way he looked through the camera. A strong sense of stillness and isolation is present in all of his films. The long shots and minimal movements of the camera engage the viewer slowly. The initial frustration and impatience I experienced at first while watching his films would gradually and non-forcefully engage me with imagery and made me aware of time passing. I was also drawn to his poetic landscapes of subdued colors, mysteriously illuminated spaces, and his recollection of childhood memories through dream-like images. I wanted my paintings to have the same qualities.



2. LandEscape, Oil on canvas, 65" x 40", 2002



1. Untitled (Detail), Oil on canvas, 2002



3. Untitled, Mixed Media, dimensions variable, 2003





4. Stone structure, Charcoal on paper, 36" x 24", 2003



5. Irregular Development, Pastel on paper, 24" x 36", 2003



6. Untitled, Charcoal, pastel on paper, 24' x 36', 2003



7. Portrait #3, Intaglio on paper, 30" x 22", 2003



8. Figure#1, Intaglio on paper, 72" x 22", 2003



9. Untitled, Intaglio on paper, 12" x 36" x 16", 2003

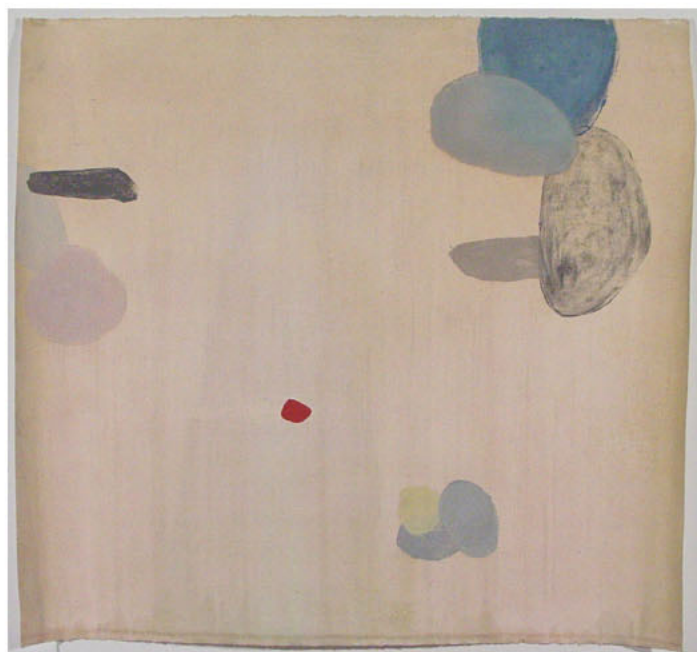




10. One Second Above, Oil, pastel on paper, 80" x 42", 2004



12. Untitled (detail), Oil on gessoed paper, 2004



11. Ruby, Oil on paper, 42" x 42", 2004

## Painting a Space

During my first two semesters, daily discussions with peers and faculty increasingly challenged my habits of working and my thinking about painting. My loose and spontaneous gestures, I realized, were not always the result of my loose and spontaneous personality but were the result of habit. The sense of nostalgia had also become reflexive. After five years in the United States, the images of my homeland started to repeat too often, and I felt I was running in a circle. The sense of urgency in the paintings that was also often associated with Abstract Expressionism became an end to itself, and I had to rethink what direction my work was going to take.

I felt a strong need to expand the space in my paintings so that it appears more open. I experimented with mural size wall drawings and crocheting. Both the murals and the crochet structures, which I stretched on and suspended from the walls, were attempts to break from the rectangular frame of painting (Fig.3). Borders were not set up at the beginning of process, and the work could expand more freely throughout the space. While I was gradually expanding the drawings across the studio walls, I realized that rectangular frames are unavoidable, that even these drawings were constructed in relationship to the rectangular studio walls and the floor. This exploration was an exercise from which I learned that an open space could be suggested on a small surface if the borders of the frame are not treated as borders.

While these new drawings still resembled landscape, they no longer referenced my homeland. They were not about any particular place. What interested me was the process itself of building an image. Starting with simple stone-like, round shapes, I was building drawings from bottom of page towards the top, as if they were real structures (Fig. 4). These drawings resembled both monumental and microscopic visions of growth and development, and it was unclear if the “structures” in each are being built or destroyed. Stones, bones, and worm-like shapes, stacked one on top of the other struggled with their own stability. They had a simultaneously playful and absurd character. I think of these drawings as cartoon-like metaphors for a continuous effort to organize and place things in an order.

They opened new possibilities. One day, James Hyde, a visiting artist from New York, looked at their earthy tones and asked “What about these greens and pinks?” He was pointing into a tray of pastels in colors I never thought of using. I added to the drawings pink, gold, lemon yellow, bright greens and blues in combinations I never thought of before (Fig.5, 6). The instability of the structures was reinforced through the combination of colors that overlapped in contradictory ways, not describing the space, light, or volume of the shapes. Looking back at these drawings, the ones I find the most exciting are the ones where space is not described but only evoked, where each line and color added to and interrupted the space of drawing at the same time. I see as a diary this series of drawings, since they were quickly executed and reflect my daily attempts to fuse together natural and synthetic colors of the older drawings and my everyday environment.

## Investigation Through Printmaking

Printmaking has been an important part of my work for more than six years now. The technical aspects of the process –preparation of plates and paper as well as the use of a press— have a meditative quality. I have always felt that my ideas come from printmaking first, and then they get expressed in painting. The traditional purpose of printmaking to produce editions did not interest me. What attracted me to printmaking is the hand-on process that still depends on mechanical processing of a press.

The unpredictability of printmaking often turns the process into an unexpected exploration. This happened in my third semester when I was making prints as colored backgrounds for new drawings. The paper surfaces I ended up with, after printing a few layers of subtly different colors on them, achieved a seductive quality I searched for. The surfaces resembled leather, fabric and rusted metal. When I hung them to dry, the prints curved and their edges became hidden underneath, giving the paper sheets an object-like presence (Fig. 7). Each print curved in a subtly different way. Their colors were those that could be seen in older architectural spaces such as churches and monasteries where soft light illuminates interior spaces, and whose long history is revealed through the scratches and stains on the walls. Monochrome soft grays, blues and pinks on the paper surfaces looked like both scratched walls and deep, misty spaces simultaneously. I think of these prints as portraits, each having a specific character that radiates from the surface.

From observing the paper's natural ways of curving, I was inspired to explore further the possibilities of physically transforming the paper. By shaping them while still wet, I manipulated the shapes of the prints into columns and scroll-like shapes (Fig. 8).

Their curves and folds, surfaces and colors resembled skin, ancient scrolls, hair and geological strata. I was interested in the physicality of the prints, and their relationship with a viewer. I wanted the physical relationship one may have with their object-like presence at first to gradually transform into the contemplation with their surfaces. I think of these perceptual shifts as stepping from the outside world into a personal realm where every sense of time and place has been erased (Fig. 9).

### In Between Abstraction and Representation

After making a series of these prints I was thinking again of the initial idea I had when I began making them, which was to draw on monochrome backgrounds. At this time, I was looking at Japanese medieval silk paintings whose richness and beauty come from the integrity of their formal elements and their narratives. In these paintings, speed and drama of a narrative is expressed through the broken picture planes that do not allow a viewer's eyes to settle. Elegant lines move across the picture planes in unpredictable ways so that foreground, for instance, can be in the upper section of a painting and the background in the lower section. Also, the clarity of mark making gives these paintings a strong, convincing presence. The fact that the purpose of the objects in them is not always clear, and that the parts of narratives are purposely hidden, makes them both visually and conceptually intriguing.

The treatment of the pictorial space in Japanese art inspired me to think of spaces in my drawings differently. From the earlier compositions where the ground was still in the lower section of an image relating to a viewer physically, as if they shared the same ground, I became more interested in suggesting spaces where gravity is questioned, and where the object/ground relationship is not clearly defined. This exploration parallels my increasing need for more airy and open spaces (Fig. 10).

This leads to new questions: how much is enough to suggest a space, lightness, and gravity? I find this reductive thinking problematic since I am not interested in minimalist reductions to a pure abstraction but am drawn to the images that still stand in between abstraction and pictorial. The stone-like shapes in the earlier works that were stacked one

on top of the other, in recent drawings look as if they are becoming freed from each other's support, and are falling, rising or floating in air (Fig. 11). I am drawn intuitively to the ideas of the uplifting but still fragile energy of a new beginning, a sense of levitation, the transitional moments of becoming—. Maybe they are coming from the simple fact that I am graduating and am beginning something different. More likely, I believe, is that these ideas come from my tendencies to think about the invisible. I agree with Paul Klee's idea that art does not reproduce visible but makes visible. The spaces in my recent drawings feel lighter and almost freed from gravity, but I am also interested in interrupting their meditative atmospheres. Their intimacy is challenged by the feelings of uncertainties, playfulness and absurdity.

Work's existence in between abstraction and representation, and the evocation of what is absent from the work is what interests me. By limiting my exploration to three elements – shape, color and line – they are becoming increasingly more complex. The roundness of the shapes I associate now with strength, and more the shapes get elongated weaker they appear. Painted with brush, stamped or collaged on the surface, their meanings diversify even more. Thick or washed out, shiny or mat, smooth or rough, transparent or solid, light or dark – through the endless possibilities of visual language I hope to record the moments of life (Fig. 12). Each mark and blob of paint is a second different from the previous one. Rather than making statements and conclusions I want my work to slow down a viewer, and inspire him/her to notice moments passing.

## Conclusion

At the end of graduate school one question dominates my everyday work: what does it really mean to paint today? How can a two dimensional surface reflect tension, lightness or heaviness, as well as aspects of the human body and psyche today? Peggy Cyphers, in the book *After the Fall/Aspects of Abstract Painting since 1970*, in writing about abstraction being political, she states, “We aspire to stillness and calm between times of dizzying information megadose. The phenomenology of painting puts people back in their bodies. Being in the moment has become an incredibly political position.” Besides the slowness and calm to which I also aspire, I want my work to seem unfinished and open to various interpretations, to hold a strong visual power and succeed to combine the sense of everyday living with universal human need for more than what daily life can afford. In the book on Richard Tuttle, and the work he made in Institute of Contemporary Art in Amsterdam, Matthias Haldemann wrote, “Real space appears as a potential expansion of the work. Presence and absence correspond. The real takes shape as an artistic potential, artistic as something potentially real”.

In today’s age of visual information, painting is both challenged and encouraged to find its new meanings. I find it increasingly difficult to work within limited parameters and have a style. I hope my work will keep changing in unpredictable ways, keep opening more questions and remain a mystery.



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### VITA

Dragana Crnjak was born 1977 in Bosnia. In 1997 she and her family moved to the United States as refugees. She studied painting and printmaking at The University of Akron and received her BFA in 2002. She was awarded with Senior Award of Excellence from Myers School of Art at The University of Akron, and a number of travel grants that enabled her to study in Scotland and France. She also received the Graduate School Fellowship from Virginia Commonwealth University in 2002, and Virginia Museum of Fine Arts Professional Fellowship in 2004.